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SUBJECT: TAJIK-IRANIAN FRATERNAL RELATIONS RECONFIRMED

Classified By: Ambassador Tracey Jacobson; reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (SBU) Summary: President Rahmon visited Iran unexpectedly February 9-10. He returned with promises of some fuel oil to help Dushanbe in the ongoing winter power shortage, and "agreements" for Iran to consider undertaking more hydropower, power transmission, and tunnel improvement work. The visit seemed aimed at showing the President doing something about the power crisis. Commentary here also suggested that the visit was in response to a recent visit by Uzbek President Karimov to Moscow, but we doubt that was Rahmon's main motive. In return, Iran got Tajik endorsement of its desire to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. End Summary.

12. (SBU) President Rahmon flew to Iran on Feb 9. The hasty nature of this trip was apparent from the erroneous rumor the embassy heard the day before from a senior member of the President's political party, that Mr. Rahmon planned to fly to Uzbekistan to plead for energy assistance from Karimov. The President wanted to make a good impression on his Iranian hosts, so took the Boeing 737-800 belonging to the new and ostensibly private airline, Somon Air. This took Tajikistan's "first private airline" out of commercial service for two days. Somon Air is controlled by the President's brother-in-law.

13. (SBU) Officially, President Rahmon traveled to Tehran to participate in President Ahmadinejad's celebration on the anniversary of the Iranian revolution. During the visit, Rahmon and his hosts produced several assurances of increased cooperation, including that Iran would speed up construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydropower station, might fund the construction of another hydropower station, and might give additional funding to complete the Anzob tunnel north of Dushanbe, which is being built by an Iranian company. Reportedly the two sides concluded Memorandums of Understanding on defense cooperation, and the Iranian side said it would consider improving some cargo handling facilities at Bandar Abbas related to the export of Tajik Aluminum. There was talk that Iran would fund the construction of a 500 kilowatt power line from eastern Iran to Afghanistan and on to Tajikistan, and construction of two cement factories in Tajikistan. But the only concrete measure to come from this visit was Iran donating several railroad tank cars full of fuel oil for Dushanbe's thermoelectric plant, which is the city's main source of electricity now that Nurek reservoir has reached its minimal level and is supplying only a small amount of electricity to the Tajik Aluminum Company.

14. (SBU) More interesting than the agreements on economic

cooperation were statements from the Tajik side after the visit that Iran could become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) "gradually." President Rahmon said he would advocate with other SCO members for Iran's eventual transition from observer status to full membership. As the host of the next SCO summit, Rahmon may be in a position to act on his promise. (Note: Previously the Tajik Government had supported membership for Iran "in principle," but assured us in the same breath that it wouldn't happen since the SCO had no mechanism for expansion. End note.) The Tajik President also made polite noises about Iran's right to develop civilian nuclear power, and the need to ban nuclear weapons from the region.

15. (C) The Foreign Ministry Americas and Europe Director had little to say about the visit when we asked him on February 11, noting only the fuel oil donation and agreements to consider more cooperation. Two opposition politicians we spoke with both concurred with views expressed in the media, that the visit was a counterbalance to Uzbek President Karimov's perceived growing relationship with Russia. Rahmatullo Valiev, Deputy Chairman of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (Iskanderov faction, anti-government) added that Tajik relations were deteriorating with almost every country except Kazakhstan, and that President Rahmon was grasping for any friendship he could find. "Other countries just don't want to work with this government, primarily because they cannot trust them," he said. He specifically included Russia among those who don't want to deal with Rahmon's government. Rahmatillo Zoirov, Chairman of the Social Democratic Party, said he doubted that Tajikistan's evolving relationship with Iran "would amount to anything substantial." He thought Tajikistan might get some short-term benefits in the energy sector, but ideological differences between the secular Tajik government and the Iranian regime would prevent anything deeper than that.

16. (C) Comment - Talk is Cheap: The press and some contacts here have speculated that the President's visit to Iran was staged as a counterpunch to a recent visit to Moscow by Uzbek President Karimov. We doubt that was the main motive, although it could certainly be part of President Rahmon's thinking. Rahmon was probably responding to advice from the World Bank that he must get out and lobby his friends for more aid during the current economic crisis. Regardless of results, the visit makes it look like the President is doing something useful for his country. This visit looks similar to other aid-seeking visits abroad by President Rahmon, where many agreements are reached but little actually results. So Iran may have bought some more friendship, and an endorsement for its desire to join the SCO, at a pretty low price - some tank cars of fuel oil.

JACOBSON